Job Rotation in an Academic Library: Damned if You Do and Damned if You Don't!

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Abstract

This article considers job rotation—the systematic movement of employees from one job to another—as one of the many tools within the organizational development tool kit. There is a brief consideration of useful print and Internet literature on the subject as well as a discussion of the pros and cons of job rotation. The application of job rotation methods in Ryerson University Library, a small academic library, concludes the article in order to illustrate process and insights through example.

Introduction

Job rotation comes in many forms and is useful in many situations. Job rotation is the systematic movement of employees from one job to another. How this movement is accomplished depends on the purpose that you wish to achieve and how dramatic a move you are willing to take. What is the reason for embarking on a job rotation program? How does it fit with your overall human resources development and organizational culture? Is this going to be a complete rethinking of the jobs within your organization or is it going to be for a few of the staff? Is it a step-by-step process beginning with an hour per week shift, or for some longer period, or is it a complete change forever? Is the use of "job rotation" a suitable rubric for this type of all-encompassing reorganization?

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, there is a general examination of the literature. In this way there is a foundation set for job rotation as one of the tools of organizational development. Second, there is a summary of the pros and cons of implementing job rotation. Once warned, twice armed! Third, there is a study on the use of job rotation in a small

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academic library. This provides a practical example and illustrates some of the issues and insights that might assist others in assessing their own organization and the possibility of using job rotation.

Literature

Personnel do not always have to leave an organization in order to find a different, more fulfilling, or more satisfying position. Many human relations processes such as job enlargement, enrichment, restructuring, and rotation can be a means to an end. Whichever method or combination of methods is chosen depends on both the management and the staff of the organization. There are a number of articles dealing with job rotation in libraries. Pierce (2001) reported on a Phoenix, Arizona, case study that looks at movement in a public library system. Olorunsola (2000) deals with his experience in a Nigerian university library. An earlier examination is that of Perdue and Piotrowski (1986) who look at the advantages and disadvantages of a two-year rotation of reference department supervisors.

These are not the only examples of interest in job rotation within university libraries. There are several universities that have information about their job rotation and job sharing programs mentioned on their web sites. The Indiana University, Bloomington, libraries have their own process, criteria, and forms for all their staff to use. The information is clearly laid out and is an excellent example that others might find useful. Their information is located at the following URL: *http://www.indiana.edu/~libpers/jspolicies.html.* The Personnel and Employment Department at the University of Wollongong is another example with criteria laid out in their union-management contract. Their information is at *http://www.uow.edu.au/admin/personnel/conditions/gs_jobrotation.html#1.*

The business world sees the importance of such activities as job rotation in providing a dynamic, productive, and satisfied staff. Collinson (2001) compares Japanese and UK firms and notes how the transfer of research and development knowledge to the front lines can be enhanced by tactics such as job rotation. Allerton (1999) points to several techniques to reduce turnover or to improve staff loyalty. One of these is job rotation. Allerton also comments on the important issue of breaking down the them-us dichotomy through the use of short-term or of the several-hours-a-week type of job rotation. It is the Hauptman and Hirji (1999) study that sets job rotation in context as one of the many techniques from which any successful organization must draw.

With the impending retirement of many baby boomers, succession planning is growing in importance. The need for organizations to pass on the structural knowledge from experienced staff and managers to new members is critical. Of the many techniques that might be chosen to assist in this transfer are such techniques as coaching, mentoring, training, and job rotation. Gale points to the value of job rotation as one of the impor-

tant techniques in succession-planning and the development of managers at GE (Gale, 2001). Many others such as Cembrowski and da Costa (1998) also point to the importance of job rotation in succession-planning.

Much of the literature on job rotation focuses on occupational safety. Carnahan and Redfern (2000) illustrate this in their discussion of a job rotation scheduling algorithm which incorporates safety considerations. MacLeod and Kennedy (1993) also deal with the safety and ergonomic issues of job rotation. However, in addition, they provide an excellent overview of the pros and cons that should be taken into consideration when determining the fit of job rotation in general. Cheraskin and Campion (1996) do much the same in their case study of job rotation at Eli Lilly. The first two cases set job rotation into an industrial setting while the last uses a finance department situation. Together they touch on many of the issues that need to be addressed in any job rotation program.

Pros and Cons

The literature noted above points to many of the pros and cons of implementing a job rotation program. The benefits may be outlined as reductions in boredom, work stress, absenteeism, and turnover and an increase in innovation, production, and loyalty. The difficulties of implementing a job rotation program center on such aspects as experienced staff not wanting to learn new job skills or move to other locations, educating and training staff for the new jobs, the fitting of staff (skill level) and job (skill and pay structure), the direct and opportunity costs of implementing a rotation program, and—in industrial settings—putting untrained staff in hazardous situations. While this latter issue may not be uppermost in the minds of library staff, improper stooping to and loading of library shelves or pushing book trucks improperly can result in nasty outcomes!

These comments focus attention on three key challenges: the determination of the type of job rotation, the clarification of the process of changing the work structure itself, and the communication to all about the type of staff training and the length of the learning period. There are often restrictions on the type and extent of job rotations. If there is a unionized environment, the job rotation may be held within particular generic jobs or classification levels. There may be significant skill differences among the staff. Management may baulk at the short-term expense of upgrading staff or at the loss of productivity during the break-in period. It may be easier to begin with a limited job rotation program within a delimited segment of staff. Changing the processes or work structure on a small scale may be less daunting than if the program encompasses all work and staff in the organization in one fell swoop. Whatever the extent of the program, the training and on-the-job learning period may be an important consideration.

The focus of this article is on job rotation. By no means does that point to job rotation as the only means of improving the organization and its staff.

The literature illustrates that there must be a context or an organizational culture that is conducive to a job rotation program. However, trying to implement a job rotation program should do wonders at bringing out all manner of questions and issues requiring resolution.

Ryerson University Library

This small academic library is organized in a hierarchy along familiar lines. There are six unit heads reporting to a chief librarian. The units are archives, audiovisual/interlibrary loans, library access services, reference and information, systems, and technical services. Within these units are fifteen librarians, forty-seven full-time library staff, and an equivalent of approximately seven full-time staff made up of temporary employees. This latter complement varies depending on the semester work cycle. The perspective on size takes on another dimension, however, when the student body, number of faculty members, and breadth of programs are taken into consideration. There are approximately 500 full-time faculty and about 600 contract instructors (hired every semester). Over the decade there has been a continued increase in the student body from about 11,000 to almost 14,000 full-time students and from just over 30,000 to over 48,000 annual registrations in continuing education courses. The Ryerson Library has a small library staff with a very large community to serve.

There are two aspects of the library that are not so common and emphasize the breaking down of the hierarchy that often occur with such unit structure. First, there is the use of generic job descriptions for library technicians and assistants. These generic job descriptions facilitate staff moving around the library and working in several areas. Second, the library employs a library council that is composed of the chief librarian and all the librarians. This group meets every other week to discuss library-wide issues and to develop consensus around issues such as major acquisitions, new systems upgrades, generic job descriptions of library staff, job rotation, planning and budget allocation. This council acts as the management group advising the chief librarian and is a means of having all librarians participate in the library decision-making processes.

Throughout the 1990s, the library went through some turbulent times ranging from organizational and physical restructuring, through cutting budgets and increasing budgets, through two new systems implementations, and through a changing university mandate. With the arrival of a new chief librarian in 1990, an examination of all components of the library started and continues to this day. There was a restructuring from thirteen units to the current six by amalgamating such functions as reference into one unit of reference and information and stack maintenance into library access services. It was during the discussion on reorganization that the first examination of generic job descriptions for library assistants and technicians began. There was further impetus to rethink process and organization

during a university-wide deficit reduction program. With the loss of twenty-one library staff members, it was clear to everyone that to continue as usual was not possible. During this wrenching experience came the revision of our university mandate to encompass (with the requisite increase in budget) graduate programming. Faced with cutting staff and then receiving an increased budget that was earmarked mostly for collections, it was once again clear that drastic measures were needed in order to cope.

Careful examination of the implications of these changes on service and work resulted in several key initiatives. The building was renovated and the library collections and functions were relocated both to make information access, collections, and study space separate and to arrange service positions and traffic flow strategically. The DOBIS library system was replaced by a DRA system and later that was replaced by an Innovative Systems product. At the same time, the outsourced systems and cataloging units were brought in-house. The library assistant and library technician generic job descriptions were completed and reallocation of staff undertaken. For example, library technicians had reference desk duty but were located in the cataloging area so that when they were not doing reference, they were cataloging. The rotation of responsibilities for librarians and the extension to the librarians of workload analysis was initiated. A small group developed a schema of equivalent workload groupings that consisted of a mix of reference desk duty, subject collections responsibilities, portfolio leadership, and/or administrative duties. The issues around work groups, responsibilities, and rotation were the substance of many library council meetings.

There were several other developments that played out during these many discussions and actions. To attempt to minimize the impact on the university community and to gain support for the shift in collections and services, the library embarked on a strong outreach and education program. To develop collections quickly, the library focused on providing on site and remote access to electronic resources and services. This enabled students and faculty members to access library collections and services from their homes and offices and reduced or obviated the need to come to the library for information or assistance.

Goals to Be Achieved

These various developments illustrate the outward look of the many changes within the library. There were many more intangible issues that were at play. For the librarians these had to do with goals to be achieved through the workload analysis and an all-encompassing job rotation program. There was recognition that workloads were changing as a result of changes in the university and therefore there was a need to examine and to distribute work equally across all the librarians. To continue to foster a collegial environment, there was a need to maintain an open and constructive dialogue on issues around the library. This opening up of all concerns

and questions for discussion was an attempt both to reduce the feeling of personal criticism or of stepping on someone's toes and to continue the adoption of administrative processes consistent with the faculty contract as developed in the academic departments. By developing such a mechanism for examination, a systematic approach to change would be installed. This approach would also facilitate the movement within the library and reduce the stigma attached to anyone wanting to change roles, to get out of an old job, but not necessarily wanting to move up the administrative ladder.

With changes, there was an expectation that new jobs would reenergize librarians, spur an examination of processes, and initiate a continuous improvement in quality of work and service. Having the opportunity to change roles, it was felt, would bring a sense of control over and ownership of the new work. This opportunity was especially important because there had been little turnover in librarian positions and no full-scale work assessment. By outlining new opportunities for taking responsibility, there would be a continued or revamped sense of innovation and enthusiasm for library work. Providing opportunities for cross-training in this manner would enrich the librarians' appreciation of other areas and enable easier backup in cases of illness, study leave, or sudden departures. In addition, the focus on maintenance of quality service at all times became feasible with this move to broaden the skills and abilities and experience of librarians.

Process

It was in the context of change and strategic planning that discussions began on what librarians did, what anomalies existed, what the possibilities of reassignment were, and what process there would be to allocate these new roles to librarians. Discussions were held in an open and collegial style with a view toward gaining clear understanding of job content and process. As noted above, a small group examined and categorized roles and responsibilities into units of equal workload and presented their proposal to library council. Because of the prior discussion on key strategic roles and responsibilities, in addition to standard roles like collections and reference roles, there were a number of high-priority portfolios also to be allocated. These portfolios' responsibilities included such topics as library publications and the library-user education program. The allocation into units of equal workload went through several iterations until the council reached an agreement on the equality of the units. There was one unit for each of the librarians with many of the units having new groupings of subjects to administer, new lead-hand roles in portfolios, reference duty, and in some cases staff supervision duties.

A major issue was the allocation of units or, in other words, the selection of librarians for the various roles and responsibilities. With the units outlined and the process clarified, the librarians agreed to apply for the roles over which they would like to have responsibility. This was no minor

issue but required a great deal of trust in colleagues and comfort with the interview and selection process. It was understood by everyone that the selection process might result in someone having to do something that they would prefer not to do. With the agreement that rotation would be done at the end of a three-year period, it was evident that someone might not get what they wanted right away but that moving to it would be possible. In addition, a librarian who was a lead hand for one activity could also participate in some collaborative fashion in another activity. In this way, a librarian wishing to gain some experience in an area might help out and therefore be a likely candidate for it in the next rotation.

The selection process was formal in nature. There were some units for which there was only one applicant. This resulted from a tacit agreement by the librarians that some of the units contained portfolios or administrative duties—for example, systems or statistical data sets—that required extensive knowledge. These preselected units were brought to the library council and agreed upon. This was important because these few librarians, along with the chief librarian, made up the interview committee. For the rest of the units, there were more than two applicants. As a result of this, several librarians were interviewed by the committee more than once. While there was certainly some disappointment on the part of the librarians who did not get their first choice, there were no process jeopardizing concerns. On one hand, one might proffer that librarians are fairly docile and submissive types, so that any real contention was probably submerged. On the other hand, there was considerable discussion and examination of the goals and the outcomes prior to launching this process and the recognition that there were opportunities in the future for changing roles and responsibilities. Throughout the implementation there was clarity and openness in order to facilitate the successful conclusion to this difficult program during very turbulent times.

Conclusion

There was no lockstep process outlined at the start of the work analysis process. In fact, the term "job rotation" was not in common use during the process. What was evident right from the beginning of the 1990s, however, was the library-wide understanding that the whole operation was changing and that there was need for a continuous planning process. The development of a culture of change was instrumental in mobilizing the staff and especially the librarians to foster participation in the process and commitment to the goals. Communicating the culture of participation and collegiality was fundamental to allaying fears and to developing trust among the participants. For example, management restructured the library and developed generic job descriptions for the library assistants and library technicians to facilitate a better, more productive organization. Having the librarians, who were, de facto, all managers of the library, examine and re-

structure their work in accord with priorities determined by them seemed like the next logical step in improving the library and providing opportunities for growth and development. Synchronizing attitude and behavior toward this growth and development meant encouraging everyone to play a part, to follow a personal development program, even to take courses if suitable to their development and even more so if it fit with the overall direction of the library.

Throughout the process of work analysis generally and job rotation specifically, it is critical to keep the process moving so that participants see results. It is easy in times of budget-cutting to sidetrack such longer term, less-tangible programs. However, continuing the assessment of library roles and responsibilities so that the units of equal workload stay that way is important for maintaining the continued buy-in of the participants. Many of the aspects above are, no doubt, familiar to readers. In this specific case, the work of the library council, the librarians, and all staff to make this successful and keep it so is evident in their ongoing focus and continued discussions of this program. This deeply founded commitment is as essential to this program as it is to the success of any library-wide activity of this nature. There is evidently a realization that this is more than just job rotation. It is a library development process with an overwhelming sense of community service that brings the additional benefits of personal job enrichment and job satisfaction.

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